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**Framing the National School Lunch Program**

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**Framing the National School Lunch Program**

**by**

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**Report**

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## **Dedication**

To my husband, Justin Toungate, and to my parents, Marilyn and Stephen Brock, without whom I would not be where I am today.

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## **Abstract**

### **Framing the National School Lunch Program**

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The National School Lunch Program, established in 1946 under the National School Lunch Act, has grown from a commodity surplus distribution program in its early days, to its current incarnation as a nutrition program for lower income students. This paper addresses the following question, “are particular framing choices influenced by a representatives’ district or individual characteristics, or are party considerations more important in determining framing language?” Certain frameworks may be more effective for creating policy change, and given that framing shapes the way humans conceptualize a problem space, framing should be a deliberate tool used in order to constrain the debate around certain problems. In support of this claim, existing framing literature and literature on human cognition indicates that framing plays a vital role in defining the terms of debate and mobilizing the public around certain issues. However, the actual details of debate shifts and issue framing often become a ‘black box’ in theories of policy change. Content analysis of floor statements made over a 16-year period regarding the National School Lunch Program reveals that policy framing is highly dependent on district characteristics, but that language use itself does not appear to have changed significantly in the time period studied.

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## **The National School Lunch Program**

The National School Lunch Program (NSLP), established in 1946 under the National School Lunch Act, has gone through various iterations in the last 65 years. The policy has grown from a commodity surplus distribution program in its early days, to its current incarnation as a nutrition program for lower income students. The nutrition programs offered in schools have also been expanded to include a breakfast program and a special milk program. For the purposes of this paper however, these nutrition programs will all be referred to under the banner of the NSLP.

Recent literature on agenda setting, as well as on human cognition, indicates that framing plays a vital role defining a problem space and its possible solutions (Baumgartner and Jones 2009; Bowles 1998; Kahneman 2011; Wildavsky 1987). Given that framing shapes the way humans conceptualize a problem space, it should be obvious that framing will be a deliberate tool used in order to constrain the debate around certain problems. Traditionally, when we think of deliberate framing and attempts at agenda setting, we think of debates such as abortion (is it an issue of protecting life, or of women's rights?), taxes (penalizing the wealthy versus paying a debt to society), and other clearly polarized issues. However, I assert that framing becomes equally important when addressing issues that are not traditionally partisan.

While "welfare" programs have been fraught with contention over the years, the school lunch program has largely been excluded from the battle. The NSLP tends to be lumped-in with agriculture related programs, in spite of no longer functioning as a commodity distribution program, and is generally funded in farm bill legislation. This allocation as an agricultural program, rather than as a welfare program, suggests that there may be some anchoring effects (possibly remnants of its origination as a

commodity dumping program) that have prevented the NSLP from being targeted. There seems to be a base line understanding at which all parties agree that the existence of the program should not be challenged. Yet members of Congress speak about the program in many different ways, and seem to have varying desires regarding the policy outcomes. Based on the assumption that legislators are goal seeking, boundedly rational actors, I assert that framing is a tool that legislators use in order to achieve their preferred outcomes in any particular issue area.

Given that the NSLP has been fairly non-partisan, I seek to determine how school lunch policy debate been framed in order to achieve preferred outcomes for legislators. And, given that this issue is generally non-partisan, I ask if preferences will be more likely to break on some attribute other than party identification. I expect that the policy preferences of legislators, and therefore the way they discuss policy, is heavily influenced by district attributes, and somewhat less so by gender and party identification. In this study I provide analysis based on a universe of statements, broken into quasi-statements (a sentence containing a single idea or concept), made by members of the House of Representatives over a 16-year period. Through a contextual coding scheme I determine the frame used in each quasi-statement, and code the quasi-statement accordingly. I then use a Poisson regression model on this data in order to determine those congressman or district attributes that are most relevant to their decision to speak in a particular manner.

At the root of the research question is the assumption that parties and actors do have preferences on these kinds of non-partisan issues, but that these preferences may not align with the traditional frames that the Republican and Democratic parties are generally associated with. Because the issue is not necessarily associated with a Democratic or Republican position, preferences may be shaped by other state or district level factors.

The question is then, what kinds of frames are used by whom? I hypothesize that legislators from districts with more agriculturally based economies will use agricultural frames when speaking about the program; while legislators from high-poverty states will tend to use the poverty and hunger frame. I also anticipate that there may be some partisan differences that manifest themselves in Republicans emphasizing frames such as role of the state or efficiency, and Democrats using frames such as poverty. Finally, I suggest that there may be gender differences; women may be more likely to use frames that are typically perceived as more feminine, such as nutrition or poverty, while men may be more likely to focus on traditionally masculine frames such as cost and efficiency.

## **State of the Literature**

Much of behavior literature focuses on individuals in private life (not politicians) who have weak and often ill-formed preferences (Campbell et al. 1960; Converse 1964). These preferences can look contradictory. However, framing literature suggests that, rather than preferences being contradictory per se, it is that new attributes of the problem are being activated, which raises alternative considerations (Baumgartner and Jones 2009; Chong and Druckman 2007). In short, seemingly changing preferences are actually a function of environmental complexity and problem complexity rather than of literal preference change (Jones 1994; Kahneman and Tversky 1984). While politicians may be more informed and have more solid preferences than individuals, there is no reason to believe that the same basic cognitive functions do not apply to politicians. Baumgartner and Jones define policy characterization as “the set of attributes and the weights used in applying those attributes” (Jones and Baumgartner 2005, 67).

Chong and Druckman define a frame such that “a frame in a communication organizes every day reality by providing meaning to an unfolding strop of events and promoting particular definitions and interpretations of political issues” (Chong and Druckman 2007, 106). Any single dimension may have multiple coexisting arguments or frames, which may be parallel or contradictory; opponents and proponents of a policy may use the same dimension to support their respective causes (Baumgartner, De Boef, and Boydston 2008). All of this is to say that problem complexity has a large impact on framing choices. Issues that are multidimensional will have more available frames, particularly if the issue has not yet been defined in a particular partisan manner.

The literature indicates that framing effects are more powerful at the early stages of issue intrusion, and preferences become more fixed with increased information and

familiarity (Chong and Druckman 2007). Newer issues will be “distinguished by the absence of general agreement about how to construe them, whereas older issues have a defined structure and elicit more routine considerations. [However,] “traditional” issues can therefore potentially be transformed into “new” issues by reframing” (Chong and Druckman 2007, 108). In other words, as individuals become more informed about a particular issue, they will be less prone to influence from alternative attributes, since they will likely have already been exposed to these alternatives, and have formed some opinion accounting for said attributes, but reframing can at times turn old issues into “new” issues.

While political science has largely looked at framing as one step in the agenda setting process, the field of Communication Studies has employed a much richer definition of framing. Most importantly, a rich study of framing “necessarily involves an examination of power” because ignoring power then ignores the ways that frames construct meaning, and whose interests are served by those meanings (Carragee and Roefs 2004, 217, 219). It is for this reason, that it is incumbent on scholars not just to study the effects of frames, but also to study their origination.

## **NSLP Frames and the Construction of Meaning**

It is clear that issues have multiple potential frames, which can be chosen and applied at various moments throughout the issue-lifetime. One reason for this is that issues have multiple dimensions regardless of their partisan associations. Even without traditional party frames, issues will still have alternative attributes that can be highlighted to call upon latent preferences.

Given the evidence in the literature that issues that are firmly established and traditional will be less subject to framing effects, it might seem that the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) would be fairly well defined after nearly 70 years of existence. However, I argue that issues that are non-partisan should have more possible frames than partisan issues, particularly if the issues are complex, and accordingly, more multidimensional issues should offer more opportunity for framing shifts. In other words, when an issue is both multidimensional and non-partisan, it is reasonable to expect that the issue might not have been defined as clearly. Non-partisan issues should also be more open to re-framing due to partisan competition; as legislators continually seek to credit claim, they should look for issues that have not been clearly defined, and seek to establish those issues as their own.

One possible reason that certain non-partisan issues will be difficult to create sticking (or lasting) frames for is that they may have a particular kind of policy target that defies traditional frames. Ingram, Schneider, and DeLeon assert that “public policymakers typically socially construct target populations in positive and negative terms and distribute benefits and burdens so as to reflect and perpetuate these constructions” (Sabatier 2007, 93); in short, policy makers frame populations in certain ways (Schneider and Ingram 1993). However, policies such as the school lunch program

are somewhat abnormal. Firstly, children are a target population that lacks any political voice or agency in society. Secondly, children in particular are almost impossible for legislators to vilify, accuse of being lazy, or to criticize in any way. I would argue that children are seen, in society at large, as largely helpless and victims of circumstance. Therefore, children are a target population that cannot be constructed in negative terms. Given this, lawmakers who wish to oppose spending on hungry children must come up with more creative ways to do so (after all, how many lawmakers are going to be willing to accuse hungry children of being lazy or welfare princes/princesses?).

Generally I expect to see that the preferred frames of legislators will correspond more closely with district-level characteristics, given that party considerations are not as significant for a traditionally more non-partisan issue. As stated previously, I expect that legislators from states with a high farm population would frame the program in terms of agricultural language more frequently. They may have more to say regarding commodity distribution programs and their importance, and may be concerned with emphasizing the percent of appropriations in farm bills that are allocated to nutritional programs. Legislators from states with higher poverty or more constituents partaking in the Supplemental Nutrition Program (SNAP) are expected to generally frame the program in terms of poverty and hunger, or terms of nutrition and health. By framing in these ways politicians are able to return home and show that they have been serving the interests of their constituents, thus allowing credit claiming. It is important to note here, when speaking of framing choices and construction, that frames are part of an intersubjective and shared reality. Frames may be highly rationalized, while at other times they may be acquired through second-hand sources and adjusted to fit a momentary purpose. Some frames may be more internalized than others. However, in either case, frames tell us what possible solutions exist, and how the problem is oriented around other existing problems.



Given that the NSLP is generally a non-partisan issue, I expect that the lines between Democrats and Republicans may be softer, and that they may often behave in ways not “traditional,” given their party affiliations. The aforementioned district-level factors should be important. However, this isn’t to say that party won’t matter at all. I think it is reasonable to predict that Republicans will use the “efficiency” and “role of the state” frames more often, while Democrats will be more likely to use the “poverty” frame (both because Democrats tend to come from more dense urban and poor areas, and because Democrats tend to support social welfare issues). But other frames are not so obvious. For instance, it is unclear how frames such as “families” or “nutrition” will break along party lines. In short, district-level factors are expected to be predictive of the frames that legislators will choose to utilize, though some frames may also be loosely associated with partisan identification.

## **Frame Usage and the National School Lunch Program**

The data for this paper consists of Congressional floor statements made in the United States House of Representatives over a period of 16 years, though statements were only made in 13 of the 16 years (1996 to 2012). These statements were parsed into a set of 2235 quasi-statements, each quasi-statement representing a single concept or idea. This coding method allows for individual frames to be captured, and allows for the possibility that a Congressman may use more than one frame, or many frames, in making statements regarding the NSLP.

The quasi-statements were coded according to a contextual coding scheme that was developed through a careful reading of the statements. Each quasi-statement was assigned to one, and only one, category. The possible categories into which statements were coded are as follows: agriculture, nutrition, investment, poverty, efficiency, families, cost, state's rights, stigma, and symbolic. "Symbolic" is considered a non-substantive frame, including symbolic language empty of policy content, such as "this is a matter of national importance," or procedural language introducing a bill.

The agriculture frame includes statements that are primarily regarding agricultural programs or budgets. An example of a statement that would be coded as an agricultural frame is "over the years Congress continued to support school lunches by providing commodities to supplement the local education agency's lunch menu." (Cardiss Collins, 1996). The frame "nutrition" includes those statements that focus on the nutrition, health, or wellbeing of students. For example, "at the same time, too many American children are at risk because they are obese" (Lynn Woolsey, 2003). The investment frame describes any quasi-statement that has explicit language referring to investment spending, including educational investment spending; "they are 100 percent of the future of this

country, and unless they learn to the best of their ability, we are not going to have the country we want in the future.” (Bennie Thompson, 2004).

Poverty coded statements are those statements explicitly dealing with poverty, need, hunger, or the poor or disadvantaged. An example would be the following statement, “and, indeed, the National School Breakfast Program serves as a critical safety net for America's poor.” (Gwen Moore, 2008). Efficiency framed statements use language pertaining to the reduction of waste or fraud, reduction of paperwork, programmatic burdens, or other measures of efficiency or program effectiveness; for instance, “The Child Nutrition Improvement and Integrity Act streamlines the application and verification process.” Statements coded in the “families” category reference the welfare of families or of the middle class. An example is as follows, “Taking these subsidies from children when many of their mothers and fathers are fighting for our Nation's security at home and abroad would have a devastating effect on these families.” The cost frame is often a retrenchment frame, with a more negative tone (though not necessarily), and generally refers to the costliness of the program. An example of a statement falling in the cost category is, “as you know, the President, in his budget, has requested Thirteen million for Fiscal Year 2000 for the School Breakfast Pilot Program” (Eva Clayton, 1999)

Statements coded as “state,” or “role of the state” include those statements references to the proper function of government and the extent to which government should be involved in citizens lives, and concerns of states or community rights. This may include statements concerned with individuals becoming too dependent on the state. The following statement was coded under role of the state, “The bill also makes numerous changes to nutrition programs that provide greater flexibility to States and local providers” (William Goodling, 1998). The stigma category includes language specifically

regarding stigma associated with students participating in the NSLP, such as, “[students are] in many cases embarrassed because their parents are often not able to send the money to school to pay for their meals” (Rush Holt, 2003). Finally, the symbolic category includes statements that are purely procedural or symbolic without relevant tonal or policy content, such as, “Let me first thank my distinguished colleague Chairman Peterson for his extraordinary leadership and guidance in crafting this bill” (Sheila Jackson-Lee, 2007).

The total number of quasi-statements made varied significantly from year to year in this data. No statements were made during 1997 or during 2005 and 2006. However, the program was discussed heavily during 2004, and 2010. The high number of quasi-statements during these years can be attributed to program re-authorization, which occurred in both these years. Excepting 2011, the years during which President Obama has been in office have seen more consistent discussion of the NSLP in general. This increase in attention to the program is likely associated, at least in part, with Michelle Obama’s “Let’s Move” campaign. The increase in attention may also be associated with the financial collapse, which led to higher unemployment rates, and should then have led to higher program enrollment.

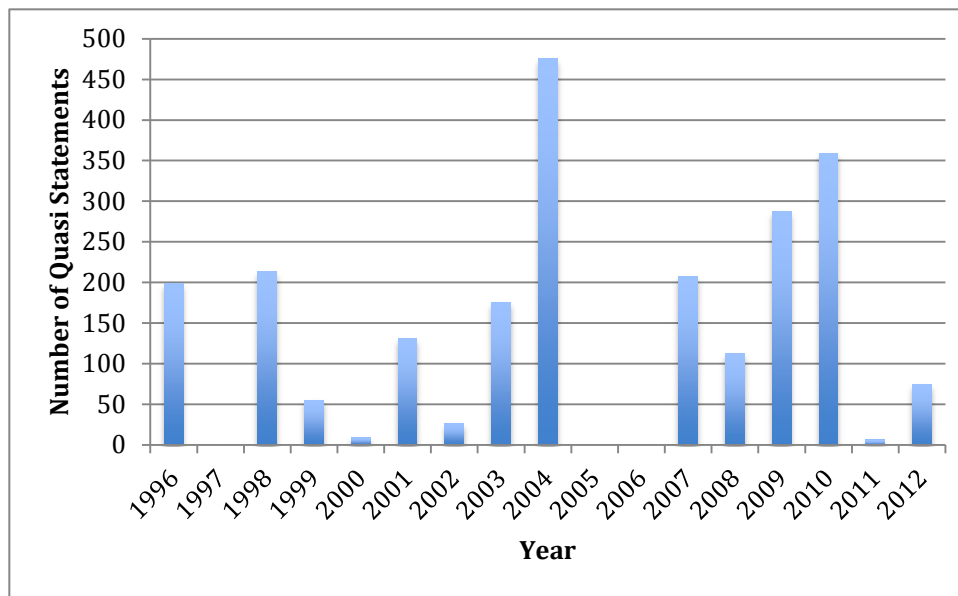


Figure 1: Number of quasi-statements per year.

Frame usage was also found to vary over the years, with particular frames being more heavily relied on during some time periods than others. This temporal variation in frame usage indicates that frames may fall in and out of favor, as they are found to be more or less effective in achieving desired goals. For instance, from 1996 to 1999, it appears that frame usage was relatively evenly distributed, with slightly heavier reliance on efficiency and nutrition. In 2000 the efficiency frame, though used at a high percentage, is relatively insignificant due to only 9 quasi-statements in total. Beginning in 2001, however, the nutrition frame became far more popular, and has continued to be a popular frame, in spite of a break during which no statements were made during 2005 and 2006; after 2008 the nutrition frame was slightly less prominent, but still frequently used. In 2008, as the nutrition frame was decreasing slightly in usage, the investment frame saw an uptick. Finally, in 2011 there was what appears to be an enormous spike in usage of the agricultural frame, but this should not be relied too heavily upon due to the low number of total quasi-statements during that year (six).

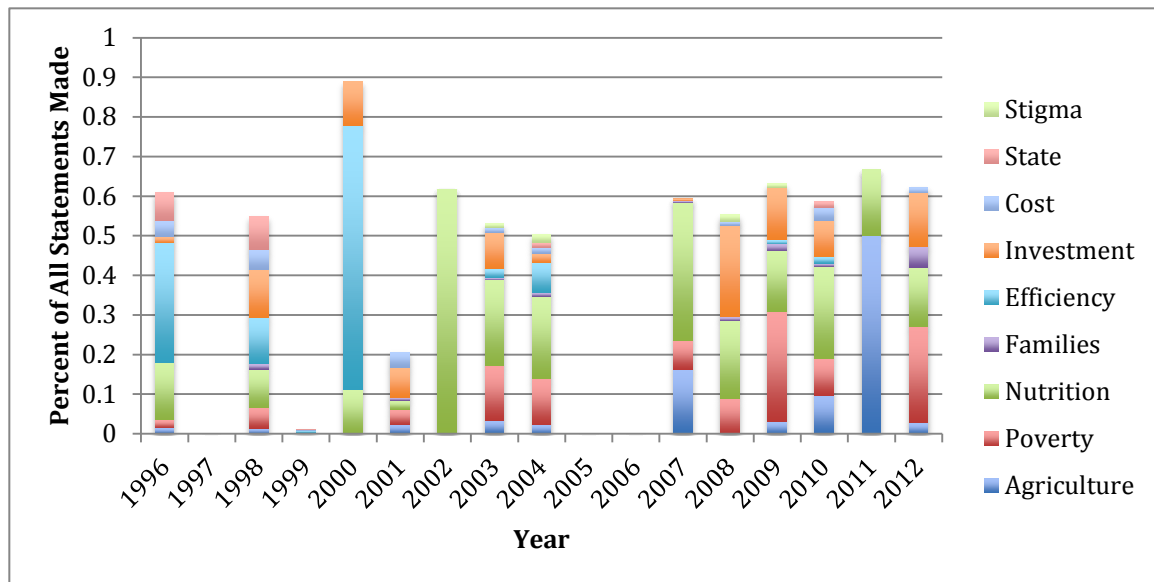


Figure 2: Frame Usage Over Time.

It is notable that, during years when the program was heavily discussed, frame usage seems to be most heavily focused on nutrition, and later, on poverty and investment in addition. While other frames were used at higher rates in several years, these tended to occur during years during which there were very few mentions of the program overall. This suggests that, rather than seeing frames move in and out of fashion, certain frames are reliably more popular (and inferably, effective) than others. In fact, for the years 2000 and 2011, both occurrences of quasi-statements can be attributed to single members of Congress, one pontificating on a topic relevant to his district, the other on concerns over waste and fraud. This suggests that members may be using periods of generally low attention in order to make statements that can be used for credit claiming within their districts.

On average, the NSLP seems to be a Democrat-owned issue. Democrats were responsible for approximately 72% of total quasi-statements, while Republicans were

responsible for the other 28%. This is particularly interesting as, from 1995 to 2007, Republicans controlled the House, though by a slight majority. Men made 67% of the quasi-statements, and women only 33%. However, that men should speak more than women on this issue is relatively unsurprising given that the composition of the House of Representatives is weighted heavily toward males.

## **Members of Congress as Delegates**

There are two distinct models of Congressional representation. One model suggests that members of Congress act as delegates and carefully represent the desires of their districts, the other suggests that they act as trustees and vote in a manner consistent with their own best judgment, though based on the desires of their constituents. Scholars also theorize that Representatives may act as delegates in some policy areas, and as trustees in other policy areas (Fox and Shotts 2009; Kuklinski and Elling 1977). The delegate theory predicts that representatives will purposively reflect the preferences of their constituents (McCrone and Kuklinski 1979). Beyond simply acting as delegates, literature indicates that district level demographics and characteristics directly impact the characteristics of those members elected to represent that district (Casellas 2009). If members of Congress behave as trustees in making policy decisions regarding the NSLP we might expect to see weak correlations between district characteristics and policy decisions. However, if it is true that district characteristics directly impact the characteristics of the members elected, and members also often act as delegates, then we might expect to see that representatives will reflect their districts at least in making statements regarding the NSLP. Because floor statements are a relatively low-cost method of credit claiming with one's district, it seems even more probable that this kind of delegate behavior will occur.

In order to determine if district characteristics determine those frames that legislators use in discussing the NSLP, district-level indicators were collected from the 2006-2010 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates as disseminated by the Census Bureau. District level characteristics are assumed to be relatively stable and extrapolated to be reasonably accurate for the entire 16-year period. The characteristics



included are: the percentage of the district workforce employed in the agricultural sector, the percentage of the district composed of families with children under the age of 18, and the percentage of the district relying on the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). Additionally, a measure of average state unemployment for each member of Congress was included, intended to function as an indicator of each state's relative economic health. Gender and party are also included as independent variables, though gender is certainly not a district-specific characteristic, and party is only to an extent (a typically liberal district may elect a conservative or moderate member). These variables are intended to control for individual Congressman attributes that are distinct from his or her district. No members who made quasi-statements were re-districted during the time frame of this analysis. Further, in only one case was a member of Congress replaced in his district by another representative not of the same party.

The hypotheses made in this paper are as follows: given these independent variables, if members of Congress are behaving as delegates and closely attending to their district characteristics, we should expect that members from more agricultural districts will use the Agricultural frame more frequently. Likewise, we might expect that those districts with a high number of families with children would use the families frame more often. Members who have high percentages of SNAP participants might be expected to focus more on poverty and nutrition. High average state unemployment is also expected to be a predictor of use of the poverty frame.

As previously noted, party may still be relevant to predicting frame usage in some cases. I predict that Republicans will use the "efficiency" and "role of the state" frames more often, while Democrats will be more likely to use the "poverty" frame (both because Democrats tend to come from more dense urban and poor areas, and because Democrats tend to support social welfare issues). Gender differences are also predicted;

women may be more likely to use frames that are typically perceived as more feminine, such as nutrition or poverty, while men may be more likely to focus on traditionally masculine frames such as cost and efficiency.

## **Data and Design**

For my data an event count analysis is appropriate for these data, given that the dependent variable is an event count of the number of times a member of Congress uses each individual frame. Using the Congressman as my unit of analysis, the dependent variables are the 10 frames measuring language use. Because district-level factors are expected to be predictive of the frames that legislators will choose to utilize, I aggregated the quasi-statements to the district level. As the number of statements a Congressman can make, and hence the frequency at which he or she uses a frame, is discrete and potentially infinite, a Poisson regression model is estimated through maximum likelihood estimation. In order to account for the possibility that some members of Congress are more loquacious than others, is taken into account as “exposure” in the regression.

The Poisson Regression model will be tested using a data set aggregated from coded quasi-statements. The quasi statements originate from a set of Congressional floor statements made in the United States House of Representatives over a period of 16 years, though statements were only made in 13 of the 16 years (1996 to 2012). These statements were gathered using [capitolwords.org](http://capitolwords.org), a project of the Sunlight Foundation. The search terms, including variants, were “school lunch,” “school breakfast,” “school nutrition,” and “special milk program.” However, once the term “school lunch” had been searched, the following terms turned up very few new statements that had not already been collected. The only statements used in this analysis are those determined to pertain specifically to the NSLP, and not those mentioning the NSLP but primarily focusing on another policy or subject. As previously noted, the statements were parsed into a set of 2235 quasi-statements. Tributes to individuals or procedural records such as permissions to file were not included as they were not representative of actual attention to the NSLP.

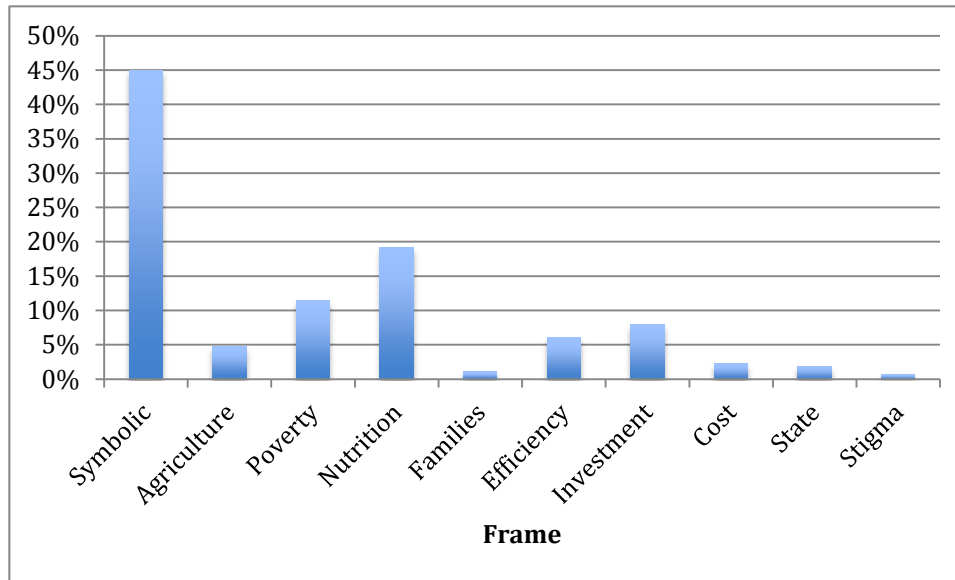


Figure 3: Distribution of Frame Use.

A histogram of the dependent variables, excluding the symbolic category which is non-substantive, indicates that not all frames were used with equal frequency. Figure 3 also demonstrates the relatively low number of non-symbolic categorized events, given the total number of quasi-statements made. Roughly 55% of all statements were assigned to a substantive frame, the rest were categorized as symbolic. Once these quasi-statements are aggregated to the Congressman level, the total number of observations is 58. This low number of non-zero events, combined with sporadic time component regarding when members of Congress make statements, makes Poisson the most appropriate model.

The independent variables are the district level characteristics previously described, as well as a state-wide unemployment average, Congressman party, and gender.

	Agriculture	Poverty	Nutrition	Family	Efficiency	Investment	States	Cost	Stigma	Symbolic
Gender	0.160 (0.225)	-0.011 (0.137)	0.530** (0.109)	0.773 <sup>+</sup> (0.469)	0.036 (0.268)	-0.064 (0.160)	-0.693 (0.632)	-0.002 (0.347)	-4.83** (1.385)	-0.193* (0.074)
Party	-0.181 (0.270)	-0.568* (0.202)	-0.479* (0.152)	-0.343 (0.694)	2.055** (0.245)	-1.154** (0.261)	2.188** (0.482)	0.614 <sup>+</sup> (0.369)	-1.366 <sup>+</sup> (0.735)	0.022 (0.082)
Agricultural Employment	0.151** (0.041)	-0.352** (0.065)	0.080* (0.026)	-0.049 (0.167)	0.056 (0.070)	-0.037 (0.057)	0.227* (0.090)	-0.120 (0.115)	-0.308 (0.198)	0.001 (0.019)
Families with Children	-0.036 (0.027)	0.014 (0.014)	0.015 (0.012)	-0.020 (0.048)	0.016 (0.024)	-0.044* (0.018)	-0.163* (0.063)	0.069* (0.034)	-0.603** (0.182)	0.005 (0.008)
SNAP Enrollment	-0.069** (0.034)	0.059** (0.014)	0.004 (0.009)	-0.005 (0.039)	-0.070 <sup>+</sup> (0.027)	0.011 (0.014)	0.025 (0.048)	0.030 (0.033)	-0.589** (0.162)	-0.002 (0.006)
Average Un- employment	0.034 (.060)	0.044 (0.034)	-0.016 (0.028)	0.191 <sup>+</sup> (0.099)	0.018 (0.057)	0.047 (0.043)	0.044 (0.091)	-0.071 (0.090)	-0.363* (0.229)	-0.035 <sup>+</sup> (0.019)
Pseudo R2	0.092	0.218	0.181	0.111	0.367	0.151	0.372	0.070	0.398	0.042

Table 1: Poisson Regression Results for 10 Frames

N= 58 for all regressions

\*\*Significant at the 0.001 level

\*Significant at the 0.05 level

<sup>+</sup>Significant at the 0.1 level

Note: Standard Errors in parentheses

Table 1 presents the results of the 10 regressions. In the case of a Poisson regression, the relationship between Y and X is not linear: it is log linear. Take for example, the Agricultural frame from the above table. Looking at the coefficients for this frame, as the agricultural employment level in the district changes by one percent, then the log of y increases by 0.151 units, while holding the other variables in the model constant.

As noted, for the Agriculture frame, district percent of agricultural employment is statistically significant and has a positive effect on the use of the frame. This result confirms the prediction that those representatives from more heavily agricultural districts will be more likely to refer to the school lunch program in terms of agricultural concerns, or even as a commodity distribution program. SNAP enrollment however, is statistically significant in a negative direction. In other words, representatives from districts with higher rates of SNAP enrollment are statistically less likely to use an agricultural frame in speaking about the NSLP.

Use of the poverty frame is negatively predicted by party, indicating that Democrats are more likely to use this frame, as predicted<sup>1</sup>. The coefficient for gender, however, is not significant, suggesting that women and men use this frame fairly equitably, contrary to predictions. Interestingly, agricultural economy of a district is a significant predictor in a negative direction. SNAP enrollment, as predicted, is a positive indicator for use of the poverty frame. Here it is useful to note that agricultural employment and SNAP enrollment have opposite and significant effects on the use of the Agriculture and Poverty frames. This indicates that there are trade-offs made as legislators make framing decisions, and that certain frames indicate contradictory

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<sup>1</sup> Party is coded as 1 for Republican, and 0 for Democrat. No Independents spoke regarding the NSLP for the duration included in my dataset. Gender is coded as a dummy variable, with women coded as 1, and men as 0.

programmatic goals. Contrary to predictions, unemployment is not found to be a significant predictor of use of the poverty frame, perhaps indicating that legislators do not closely associate high unemployment with poverty within a district.

The nutrition frame is positively predicted by gender, indicating that women are more likely to use this frame than men. The coefficient for party is significant in the negative direction, indicating that Democrats are more likely to use the nutrition frame. Both these effects confirm hypotheses made regarding gender and party effects on use of nutrition as a frame for the NSLP. Agricultural employment is found to be a positive and significant predictor of the nutrition frame. This is likely due to the attempted marketing of local commodities, for example, a quasi-statement such as “more schools serve low-fat milk and provide healthful food choices in the school cafeterias” (Rubin Hinojosa, Texas).

Only gender and unemployment are found to be significant in predicting the use of the family frame. Women are more likely to use the family frame, as are Representatives from districts with higher average unemployment. Neither of these are the indicators expected to be significant for the family frame, and it is particularly notable that the percentage of families in a district has no significant effect on the use of the family frame.

Confirming the hypotheses, coefficient for party is positive and significant for the efficiency frame, indicating that Republicans rely on this frame more heavily than Democrats. However, gender is not found to be significant for this frame, indicating that men are not actually more likely to be concerned with efficiency than women. District SNAP enrollment has a negative effect on the use of the efficiency frame.

Use of the investment frame is significantly and negatively associated with party, meaning that Democrats are more likely to use this frame. Investment is a particularly

interesting frame in terms of its association with party, as there is no ideological reason to believe that Democrats should be more concerned with investing in the educational and long-term opportunities for the nation's children than Republicans are. However, the regression results indicate that this kind of language is clearly associated with Democrats. Families with children is significantly and negatively associated with the use of this frame.

Party, as predicted, is significantly and positively associated with use of the role of states frame. Unsurprisingly, Republicans are more likely to use this kind of language than Democrats. The families with children percentage is again a negative predictor of frame use. Agricultural employment, however, positively predicts use of the role of states frames. Likewise, Republican identification is also a significant predictor for use of the cost frame, though gender is not. Percentage of families with children here, is a significant and positive predictor of frame use.

The use of the stigma frame is significantly and negatively associated with gender, indicating that men use this frame more often than women. The party coefficient signifies that Democrats are more likely to refer to stigma. Families with children, SNAP enrollment, and average state unemployment are all negatively associated with the use of the stigma frame. Again, this suggests trade-offs among frames. Perhaps for very poor districts basic hunger concerns outweigh worries about what others will think. However, these indicators may not be as significant a result as they appear, as the stigma frame was used the least frequently; only in 17 instances, or .73% of the time.

The final frame, symbolic, is considered to be a non-substantive frame. Gender is slightly predictive, but otherwise, use of this frame is nearly random. This is appropriate, as it is expected that regardless of district level characteristics or of party, members of



Congress will use filler, procedural, and non-substantive sentences in their floor statements.

As discussed, party is a significant predictor of behavior for half of the possible frames. Democrats are slightly more likely to use the poverty, nutrition, and investment frames. Republicans are more prone to the efficiency and role of states frames. These results suggest that, while partisan positions are less clear on the NSLP, legislators none-the-less are influenced by ideology. Democrats would favor those frames that might lead toward program expansion, while Republicans might favor those frames that would lead toward program retrenchment. As indicated in the Appendix, the efficiency frame includes language suggesting ways to make the program less costly, more efficient, and less fraudulent. Likewise, the states frame is largely concerned with the proper role of the federal government and deference to local communities. Both these frames suggest reducing or tightening the role that the federal government plays in the NSLP. In spite of the clear influence of party, this study clearly demonstrates that members of Congress use language consistent with their district-level characteristics, and indicates that members are behaving in ways that will facilitate credit claiming.

## Discussion

There are two distinct levels of variation evident in these results. One level of variation is the temporal variation of frame usage at the aggregate level. Referring back to Figure 2, found on page 11, it is clear that frame usage varies across time. This variation may be due, as previously noted, to frames falling in and out of favor or being found to be more or less useful. It may also, however, be a result of the changing composition of the House of Representatives over time.

At the cross-sectional level, we can see the variation in frame usage based on representative and district characteristics. This kind of variation indicates that members are reflective of the unique characteristics of their districts, and simultaneously, that they attend to party concerns. It is evident, when looking at these results, that members have persistent disagreements regarding the aims and relative importance of the NSLP, yet while these disagreements fall loosely along party lines, they also align with district-level characteristics. Though there has been much theorization regarding the increasing polarization of Congress (Theriault 2008; Trubowitz and Mellow 2005), it is clear that there are still issues on which cross-cutting cleavages counter-weigh party concerns. My findings indicate that, on these issues, district attributes are at least as important in determining the goals of Congressmen, and as indicated by language.

As suggested earlier in this paper, the likely cause for non-partisanship regarding the NSLP, is linked to the social-construction of the target group, children. They argue that “the social construction of target populations has a powerful influence on public officials and shapes both the policy agenda and the actual design of policy” (Schneider and Ingram 1993, 334). According to Schneider and Ingram’s types of target populations, children fall into the positive construction, and weak power category, placing them

squarely as “dependents,” and the authors suggest that policy makers will prefer to appear aligned with these interests (1993). In fact, this is highly consistent with the evidence presented here. Though several frames, cost, efficiency, and states, appear to be associated with retrenchment based on careful reading of the quasi-statements within the categories, they are generally weakly associated. Even quasi-statements within these categories are more likely to suggest improvements to the program, and a desire to strengthen it at least nominally through, for instance, return to local control. Policy makers clearly prefer not to be seen as “against children.”

## **Conclusion**

This study has examined the premise that, as legislators are goal seeking, boundedly rational actors, they will use framing as a tool to achieve preferred outcomes, in particular in reference to the case of the NSLP. Through cross-sectional examination I have showed that, consistent with my hypothesis, legislators do use distinct frames, breaking along district-level attributes rather than solely along party identification lines. Legislators from districts with a higher proportion of agricultural sector workers rely more heavily on agricultural frames when speaking about the program; while legislators from districts with a larger proportion of SNAP users will tend to use the poverty and hunger frame.

Partisanship is relevant in the usage of the efficiency and state frames, and in the use of the poverty and investment frames, in both cases are predicted; efficiency and state frames are used more frequently by Republicans, while Democrats use the investment and poverty frames more heavily. Interestingly, counter to my prediction, party is not significant for cost. Gender differences are also less apparent than predicted, though nutrition is a more female frame and stigma a more male frame. Neither poverty, efficiency, nor cost, show the significant gender effects that were predicted. This is strong evidence that district level characteristics at least as important as congressman (or woman) attributes such as gender or party in determining those frames that a congressman will find useful.

Major frame use shifts were not found to have occurred, but frame usage did vary over time. However, that no frames dropped out or were replaced entirely by new frames may be an artifact of the comparatively brief time period captured in this analysis. There were however, distinct periods in which attention itself was higher or lower. These

periods were highly correlated with reauthorizations of the program and with the economic downturn, suggesting that environment may impact attention more than specific frame use.

Continued study of framing is a valuable pursuit, particularly with regard to those issue areas that are regularly considered to have bi-partisan support, and are not thought of as particularly contentious. These frames may be less obviously associated with parties or with advocacy for policy expansion or retrenchment, but they are no less impactful because of their subtlety. Frames construct meaning and heavily impact the available solutions to a problem. Failing to examine frames signifies a disregard for power-dynamics and a lack of understanding in regards to the sausage-making process behind American public policy.

## Appendix

### Codebook:

#### Overview of the Data Set

I have collected all floor statements specifically regarding the National School Lunch Program from the 104<sup>th</sup> Congress in 1996, to the 112<sup>th</sup> Congress in 2012. Data was collected from CapitolWords.org, a project of the Sunlight Foundation. Statements were then disaggregated into quasi-sentence; each sentence representing a distinct idea or concept. Statements omitted included tributes to individuals and administrative statements such as permission to file or readings of a bill. Search phrases were as follows: “school lunch,” “school nutrition,” “school breakfast,” and “special milk program,” including variants.

#### Content Coding

Quasi-statements have been analyzed using a comprehensive coding scheme based on a through reading of all quasi-statements. I employed 10 topic codes, and each quasi-statement was assigned one, and only one, content code based on the main subject or frame of the quasi-statement.

#### Variable Names and Descriptions

##### *Speaker ID*

This column records a unique identifier for each speaker and has no substantive meaning.

##### *KeyID*

This column records the unique identifier for each observation and has no substantive meaning.

##### *Congress*

This column records the Congress during which the statement was made.

##### *Date*

Indicates the date on which a particular statement was made.

##### *Agriculture*

This includes statements that are primarily regarding agricultural programs or budgets. Key words include: commodities, agriculture, farm surplus, commodity donation program, etc.

##### *Nutrition*

This column includes those statements that focus on the nutrition, health, or wellbeing of students. Often both poverty and nutrition will be mentioned in a statement; however, if the dimension of nutrition and health is highlighted over poverty or hunger, then the statement will be in this category.

#### *Investment*

This category is one which has explicit language referring to investment spending, including educational investment-spending.

#### *Poverty*

Includes floor statements explicitly dealing with poverty, need, hunger, or the poor or disadvantaged. Includes language associated with obesity concerns. If the dimensions of poverty or hunger are highlighted over nutrition or health then the statement is coded accordingly.

#### *Efficiency*

Includes language mentioning to waste, deception, or fraud in the NSLP. Also includes references to those illegally receiving benefits, or to benefits given to those who are not in the country legally. Includes language concerned with reduction of paperwork, programmatic burdens, and other measures of efficiency and cost effectiveness.

#### *Families*

Includes language specifically referencing the welfare of the middle class or families.

#### *Cost*

This is may be a negative frame referring to the costliness of the program. May refer to the percent of the overall budget spent on nutrition programs. NOT including statements regarding the percent of agricultural budget spent on nutrition. Includes statements about “targeting” the program (cutting costs).

#### *State*

Those statements referring to families or individuals depending on the state, or becoming dependent on the state; also includes references to the proper function of government and the extent to which government should be involved in citizens lives, and concerns of states or community rights.

#### *Stigma*

Includes language regarding stigma associated with students partaking in the NSLP

#### *Symbolic*

This category includes those bills which are purely procedural, descriptive of legislation, or are symbolic speech contain no relevant tonal-content.

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